

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

"Remember Me"

Gospel Lesson

Luke 23:32-43 (NRSV)

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus^[a] there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Bible/Sermon Focus

Jesus is one of the most political leaders in history. The Jesus movement was also a deeply political movement. The Gospels are deeply political books. So much so that when the King James Version was edited, certain "anti-empire" language was purposely removed or changed. When Christians talk about Jesus as "political" we need to be clear that we don't mean "partisan." Jesus is not owned by a political party. Not today, and never before. His compassion and intersection with all people who crossed his path are an example to us.

In this week's text we meet Jesus hanging from a cross in the middle of his state ordered execution by crucifixion. Crucifixion was one of the worst ways to die. It was not only painful, but meant to torture, shame, and strike terror into those who watched. Rome used crucifixion to send a message: "This is what happens to those who mess with us." This particular death was a political one. Jesus aligned himself with those who are most marginalized. "The Jesus we meet in Luke's Gospel doesn't just reach out to the outcast. He becomes the outcast."

Charges were brought against him by other oppressed people, by his own people who also lived under Rome's thumb. Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey while reflecting on the rebellions of African enslaved people writes, "one common denominator saddened me: the one who betrayed them. It never fails that the betrayer not only fails the community, they never really loved themselves. They wanted validation from their oppressors. --- It's still happening."

Local authorities from Jesus' own community were the ones who allowed Rome to execute their own people. Even one of the criminals hanging next to Jesus was mocking him, "Save yourself and us."

And all of this for what? *"We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king."* (Luke 23:2)

And in the midst of all this happening, we find another man, hanging from cross next to Jesus, who calls him by name and asks that he not be forgotten. An audacious ask from a man who will never have the opportunity to make right what he has done wrong; who will not be restored to community in this life.

And Jesus will die the same kind of death. The death of a criminal, brought on by a community who betrayed him, executed by a state that didn't care.

When we Christians talk about restorative justice, we are affirming a belief that salvation in Jesus Christ means restoration of relationship. We will be restored to community, not cast out. People who do wrong things (and we will all do wrong things) need a way to get better. Those who have been harmed deserve to heal and that healing will never be complete if the victimizer is simply punished.

This is what the United Methodist Book of Discipline says, *"Instead of punitive justice (intended to punish), the UMC affirms restorative justice. Most criminal justice systems around the world are retributive. These retributive justice systems profess to hold the offender accountable to the state and use punishment as the equalizing tool for accountability. In contrast, restorative justice seeks to hold the offender accountable to the victimized person, and to the disrupted community. Through God's transforming power, restorative justice seeks to repair the damage, right the wrong, and bring healing to all involved, including the victim, the offender, the families, and the community."*

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between being political and being partisan?
2. How is being a Christian political?
3. Reflect on this quote from Rev. Sharon Ringe, *"The repentant criminal thus becomes the only person to recognize that rejection and death are for Jesus the way to royal power at the right hand of God."*
4. What do you know about restorative justice? What do you think about it?

Prayer

Holy God, who becomes the outcast, restore us to relationship with you. Forgive us for seeking retribution, and show us how to move ourselves to the margins of our community to discover how your audacious grace is restoring all things. In your Spirit, Amen.

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